

INTERVIEW BY HARRIET LOWE, COMMUNICATIONS & RESEARCH OFFICER



KIZ MANLEY

HIP HOP HEALS

**Kiz is the founder
of Hip Hop HEALS CIC.**

**Hip Hop HEALS is based
in Birmingham and
received a grant from
the Foundation in 2021
to deliver a creative Hip
Hop academy.**

You can learn more
about Hip Hop HEALS at
www.hiphophealsuk.org.

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You founded Hip Hop HEALS – what led you there?

I lost my older sister in a car accident in 2000. I was studying at the time. The weekend it happened was my graduation. Me and some friends were away at a festival and while I was there, I got the phone call. I went into shock and repression as I was really close to her. Over the years, I experienced vicarious trauma and PTSD which was never diagnosed; I only ever had counselling for grief. I had all sorts of problems in my life, with my emotions, behaviour and mental health. I didn't know there was anything wrong. I actually thought I'd coped amazingly well with her death but in reality I'd completely disassociated and numbed myself.

After seven years, I had a mental health breakdown. I lost my job, I just couldn't work. The doctors I saw still didn't mention trauma, just delayed grief.

Fast forward 18 years later, I was on an MSc course for creative writing for therapeutic purposes – I had been interested in how creativity could help heal grief. During the course, I read a book on trauma by a British psychiatrist called Prof. Gordon Turnbull. Everything he described in the book I could relate to. I thought, hang on a minute, this describes my entire life!

Through the MSc, I learned how to run a therapeutic group with writing as the tool for healing. However, I was really aware that men are not accessing this kind of therapy and are killing themselves at a higher rate than women. Most of the poetry groups that I've seen are attended or organised by white, middle-class women. The music I'm into is Black music: reggae, dub, jungle, garage hip hop and so on. I felt if I could use the poetry and bibliotherapy techniques I'd learnt with Hip Hop lyrics, it might make seeking help more accessible to the people and communities I am part of.

After my MSc, I applied for some jobs but found a lot of barriers as people didn't really understand what I was doing, so I decided to set up Hip Hop HEALS. Hip Hop Therapy began in the US as a social work intervention, but I was also really keen to develop a practice that was relevant to the dance music that is the culture in the UK.

I was awarded a place on the prestigious Lloyd's Bank School for Social Entrepreneurs Start Up programme and turned Hip Hop HEALS from a project into a CIC, with a grant of £1,000. I recruited a youth panel who helped steer our development. They found venues to launch our first workshops and were ready to help deliver when we went into the first Covid-19 lockdown. Unable to continue,

we pivoted and started a podcast. I began training myself in music production so I could bring music-making into my workshops. In 2021, we received a grant from the Baring Foundation which allowed us to take the work forward.

What have you done so far with the Baring Foundation grant and what you will be doing next?

We partnered with Birmingham Centre for Arts Therapies for the grant application. Over the last year, we have been developing a trauma-informed Hip Hop academy to provide training in our methods. We've run pilots with 30 trainees over two pilots, which lasted six weeks. We had a mixture of youth workers, arts therapists, students and community helpers. The training was open to all but we focussed on global majority people because of the lack of equality and opportunities for this group. There was a mixture of community leaders, participatory artists, social workers, counsellors, youth workers and a couple of teachers. The idea is that they will filter the training and information within their services. We aren't training people to be therapists but training them to recognise trauma and to be able to use some of the principles of trauma-informed Hip Hop in their interactions with clients, students or participants.

What is effective about therapeutic Hip Hop for mental health and in particular trauma?

The brain is really complex. I'm not a neuroscientist but I've learned lots about the impact of trauma through my work, and because I have PTSD myself. I've used all the therapeutic Hip Hop

techniques I am now spreading, during my own recovery journey. I had a massive relapse during the pandemic and would not have been able to come back to work otherwise. I'm in good health compared to where I was.

If someone is in flight or freeze mode, a physical bodily reaction to trauma, one of the most calming things you can do is to use repetitive, rhythmic sound and movement. Hip Hop is repetitive, rhythmic and calming! It's like the mother's heartbeat in utero. Trauma also makes life unpredictable and frightening; the musical structures of rap offer predictability. Telling autobiographical stories is central to Hip Hop culture and music. This has its origins in people rapping on street corners about poverty and the destruction of communities in The Bronx. If someone is experiencing emotional repression and disconnection, recounting their stories can help them make sense of their experiences and reconnect with their emotions. I use the therapeutic writing modalities I learnt from my MSc in Creative Writing for Therapeutic Purposes to make things like poetry therapy more relevant for people like me, who love reggae and rap.

Breathwork and yoga are also key. When MCs rap, they must control and regulate the release of air from their lungs up through the throat passage. Spittin' bars requires a certain way of breathing. Breakin' (the correct term for 'break dancing') moves your body in all sorts of shapes and poses, a bit like yoga. Like this, there are expressive art therapy techniques that can be applied through the cultures of global majority people, rather than Eurocentric means e.g. Western Classical music. My thesis is available on our website

and shows how I have developed a unique, narrative-based form of therapeutic Hip Hop practice.

What will you be doing next?

So, we've done our pilots and we'll be publishing our evaluation report this year. We are in the process of applying the survey and focus group data to develop the curriculum for our trauma-informed Hip Hop courses. They will be accredited and delivered through our Hip Hop HEALS Academy.

We also used the money to launch a successful webinar series last year. We've taken over Birmingham Centre for Arts Therapies monthly research seminars until Summer 2023. We are so lucky to have experts in Hip Hop Therapy and trauma joining us from all over the world, sharing techniques and tools for people to take into their own practice. This has never been done before so we've become world-leaders in the field. Our February webinar sold out really quickly, so we are chuffed. Eventually, we will sell our courses and training to those who can afford it like universities and art therapy organisations. This will enable us to offer it to others for free, as part of our social enterprise model.

What do you most enjoy about your work?

I love workshops. I was born to deliver! Being a secondary English teacher by trade means I can combine all the things I love in our new Hip Hop HEALS Academy: Hip Hop, creativity and helping people. The principles of Hip Hop Therapy and therapeutic Hip Hop can be used in lots of different ways. Being able to find connection with someone and work out what works for them, and their wellbeing, is really rewarding.